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Duxbury Clipper

Blizzards that Buried

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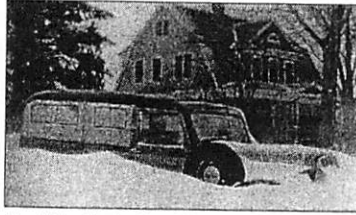
So you think the Blizzard of '05 was bad? The century is young, but it might be a record. Some of the 20th century's biggest blizzards were also ones for the record book. Plymouth's *Old Colony Memorial* (OCM) was the newspaper that recorded such events for Duxbury before the *Duxbury Clipper* began, and is a source for how Duxbury fared in these fierce winter storms.



The 20th century had not even begun when a severe blizzard swept coastal Massachusetts just before Valentine's Day 1899. The snow amounts were reported at 20 inches but the blowing and drifting made drifts 6-8 feet in places. The trains that ran from Boston through Duxbury to Plymouth were stopped for three days. One train that had left Boston just as the blizzard was peaking got stuck on the Jones River bridge between Duxbury and Kingston. There it stayed overnight, marooning passengers and crew. When the coal for the engine gave out, they burned fencing from along the track until help came. Passengers had to flounder through the drifts and some even made it home before the train did, which finally arrived 26 hours late.

Five ships anchored in the cove at Saquish during the storm, but two broke from their moorings. One ship, the *Massasoit*, was owned by a Winsor from Duxbury. It wrecked on Plymouth Beach and the crew had to walk across ice floes in the harbor to safety. Milkmen could not make their rounds and a "milk famine" set in for a few days. Milk was set aside for babies, and cows within reach "had many ardent admirers." Only a year earlier, the Great Gale of November 1898 devastated the whole coastline. The winds of the blizzard of '99 were fortunately not as strong nor the tides as damaging.

Ten years later, on Christmas night 1909, heavy deep snows arrived with northeasterly gales. Duxbury Beach was washed out at several points, including undermining the two Wright family cottages that once stood on the beach. These cottages were later floated over to Landing Road. Several gunning stands were destroyed and the flood tides strewn lumber along the shore from the Duxbury Coal and Lumber Wharf at Snug Harbor. Sweetser's store had five feet of water in its basement and the pigs in the barn were only just rescued before they were drowned. The wall at the flagpole on Washington Street near the Drew



The Valentine's Day blizzard of 1940 buried the Clapp Labs beach wagon at the height of the storm.

Photos courtesy of DR&HS' Duxbury...An Album.

house was under a foot of water, and once again people used the comparison to the Great Gale of 1898. The very low barometric pressures during the Christmas blizzard of '09 were some of the lowest ever seen.

On February 5, 1920, a blinding blizzard shut down Duxbury and the South Shore. Snow was three feet on average, with drifts of eight feet in places. The worst part of the storm was the coating of ice that overlay the snow. By 1920 many families had cars, but for the week after this blizzard horses and sleighs were the only way to get around. Once again the train service was the lifeline to towns like Duxbury, and the OCM reported, "It is a real novelty to see the train go through the town again and receive our daily paper. No mail for a week is some kind of record." Several Duxbury residents were stranded at the Kingston railroad station, and chose to walk home during the blizzard. It took them five exhausting hours to do so. Duxbury children had a great time "coasting" throughout the town since schools were not in session. One of the most popular runs was down Captain's Hill (in the days when there were few trees) across the frozen bay all the way to Bay Road. Temperatures had fallen to -8 degrees but warmed to the 40s and then fell again, so Duxbury was encased in ice that sparkled in the sun like a "fairytale ice story."

The winter of 1933-34 had usual amounts of snow but record-breaking cold temperatures. Duxbury Bay froze with ice depths about 12 inches. The OCM reported two Duxbury children iceskated from Duxbury to Bug Light, a distance of four miles. They also said "a man could take a pleasant drive with a horse and team across the Bay now with perfect safety." Our harbormaster Don Beers would remind us saltwater ice is never safe.

Many longtime Duxbury residents remember the Valentine's Day blizzard of 1940 that stranded thousands in Boston. Trains, power and communications shut down as 10 foot drifts were reported in Duxbury. Bea Richards of Surplus Street remembers just staying put and shoveling and shoveling. The few plows that were available were needed for the main roads. Duxbury lanes and driveways had to be shoveled out by hand.

Bad winter storms were recorded with regularity in 1947-48, 1955, 1958, 1962, 1969 and 1970-71, culminating of course in the storm of the century: The Blizzard of '78. Today we may be inconvenienced for a day or two, but the milk famines, no mail for a week, and stranded trains on bridges are reminders of the long-lasting effects of blizzards of years past. If anything, the remembered blizzards of the 20th century put the Blizzard of '05 in perspective: it is just usual winter weather for New England.



The blizzard of 1899 created 8 ft. drifts on Washington St. near The Winsor House.